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ABSTRACT

In order to determine the range and extent of adult reading in the United States, a Reading Activities Survey was conducted on interviews with 5,073 adults randomly chosen from 200 locations around the country. The survey was part of an effort to develop a test of adult literacy based on practical reading situations in which adults might find themselves and was part of the Targeted Research and Development Program in Reading, Project I. Each respondent was interviewed concerning his reading activities for 1 day. Questions concerned kinds of materials read; sections of materials read; kinds and variety of reading activities which were connected with work, play, school, or church activities; and time spent in reading. Newspapers were most often read, followed by mail, magazines, and books. Respondents varied in age from 16 to 60 and represented several educational and socioeconomic levels. General activities related to reading included travel, commuting, recreation, and free time. Only a small portion of respondents reported difficulty in reading any of the materials, leading the author to conclude that readability is not a problem for most adults. (MS)

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ADULT READERS: ACTIVITIES AND GOALS*

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In July of 1970, Educational Testing Service began work on a research project sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education as part of the Targeted Research and Development Program in Reading. This program is, in turn, one element of the overall Right to Read effort. The primary purpose of the ETS research is the description of the domain of reading behaviors of the adult American population and the translation of these reading behaviors into a prototype set of tasks or items for the measurement of adult reading achievement. This prototype set of tasks will constitute the exemplars of a larger body of reading tasks, which can then be combined in various ways to define operationally some of the goals of the Right to Read effort.

Two required characteristics of the prototype set of reading tasks received special attention. First, the tasks had to reflect realistically the actual everyday reading behaviors of American adults. And second, associated with each reading task is information concerning the benefits which may be expected to accrue to individuals who are able successfully to perform that task. The information about the benefit value of reading tasks will be of

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two kinds: self-reported demographic characteristics and perceptions of benefit by persons to whom the tasks are administered.

As an obvious first step toward the development of a pragmatically oriented set of reading tasks, it was considered necessary to find out what American adults read. However, in order to provide sufficient guidance for the task development process, it was necessary to go far beyond a simple determination of "what." We found that we were equally interested in questions of "when," "why," "by whom," "how often," "under what circumstances," and "how important." Although information on reading habits exists, it was decided that only a special survey could provide the particular array of answers which were needed. Therefore, the first major element of the ETS study was a household interview survey of a nationally representative sample of adults. The procedures and results of this Reading Activities Survey are the subject of this paper.

The survey was conducted during the period April-November of 1971, with most of the total of 5,073 interviews taking place during May and June. Response Analysis Corporation of Princeton selected the sample, conducted the interviews, and assisted in the design of the questionnaire. Much of the material in this paper descriptive of the sampling and survey procedures is drawn from the RAC methodological report. In an effort to raise completion rates, many households were recontacted during the July-September period. In addition, a supplementary sample of households was selected and interviewing carried out in October and November in order to increase the total number of completed interviews.

The universe covered by the survey included persons age 16 or over who were part of the household population of the coterminous United States. Students living at home were included as members of the universe; students living at school were excluded, as were other institutional residents. Systematic random procedures were used to select 200 sample locations. Within each sample location, approximately four listing units (averaging approximately 20 housing units each) were selected at random. Random probability procedures were used to select specific housing units for assignment to interviewers, in order to provide a self-weighting sample of households in the United States.

The instrument developed for the survey was a structured questionnaire dealing primarily with reading activities during one calendar day, usually the day preceding the interview. Substantial effort was devoted to developing a questionnaire structure which incorporated a number of specific objectives:

1. A way to begin the interview which included a series of questions on general activities, and a nonsensitive series of questions on reading which enabled interviewers to quickly divide survey respondents into readers of English and non-readers of English. Respondents who were non-readers of English were skipped over the bulk of the interview on reading activities but were asked a special series of questions for non-readers.
2. Second, the questionnaire was structured to elicit a discussion of what the respondent did during the day that was to be the basis for reporting reading activities. By first reconstructing general

activities it was believed that we would help the respondent recall specific reading items that took place in connection with other activities such as work, school, shopping, commuting, and recreation.

3. Third, the questionnaire provided a detailed record of types of reading activities, plus probes for interviewers to use in recovering as much as possible of the respondent's reading activity.
4. Finally, the questionnaire included a comprehensive set of respondent background characteristics that can be used to develop hypotheses about the correlates of reading behavior. In particular, certain of these background characteristics made possible the computation of a socioeconomic benefit index which could be associated with each reported reading activity. This index was a composite of total family income, occupational status of chief wage earner, occupational status of father, respondent's education, father's education, mother's education, interviewer rating of neighborhood, and interviewer rating of housing unit.

Each respondent was interviewed about his activities during one full day. In order to include coverage of weekend days on a systematic basis, random subsamples of respondents were designated for each of Saturday and Sunday activities, and a third and largest subsample for weekdays. Interviews relative to Saturday and Sunday activities were conducted on Monday, if possible, or Tuesday. Interviews relative to the five weekdays were conducted on the following days, respectively.

Altogether, 7,334 households were selected as part of the survey sample and 5,073 interviews were completed - an overall completion rate of 69.1%. Of the 30.9% incompleted interviews, 3.6% were because the respondent was not at home, 6.2% because no one was at home, 17.1% refused, and 4.0% because of other reasons. Persistent efforts were made to find designated respondents at home and to urge cooperation from those persons who were reluctant to participate. Among all first contact attempts only 22% resulted in completed interviews. Interviewers averaged 2.7 visits to households where interviews were completed, and 4.1 visits to households where interviews were not completed. Interview completion experience was highest in the South (75%), followed by the North Central (71%), West (66%), and Northeast (63%) regions. The pattern of completion rate differences was pronounced for communities of different sizes, ranging from a rate of 56% in central city areas of metropolitan areas with more than one million population, to 80% in nonmetropolitan rural areas. The difference in completion rate between central city and suburbs was likewise greatest in metropolitan areas of over one million, the rates being 56% and 66%, respectively.

Respondents were asked in detail about newspapers, magazines, books, and mail they had read during the day prior to the interview. For example, in reporting on newspaper reading, they were queried specifically about main or first page news, local news, women's or society pages, sports, editorials and letters to the editor, financial or business news, comics, classified ads, regular ads, TV or radio program listings, magazine section, and movie and book reviews. Respondents were asked to name books or magazines read, and to

specify the particular part or parts of each magazine read. In addition to the four genre just mentioned, respondents were asked to report on reading activities carried out in conjunction with a variety of general activities: meals, work, working around the house, school, traveling or commuting, shopping, club or church activities, attendance at a theatre, game or other public event, and recreation or use of free time. Each of these general activities was also broken down into a number of subcategories in the survey interview. For example, reading while shopping was reported with respect to writing on packages or labels, lists, price, weight, or size information, sales or other forms, checkbook or credit card, notices or signs, guarantees or warranty cards, and advertising displays.

In addition to <u>what</u> was read, information was collected regarding the total time (in minutes) spent on each reading activity, the perceived importance to the respondent of the activity (expressed on a three point rating scale), and the respondent's judgment regarding the reading difficulty of the activity and the nature of the difficulty, if any. Finally, for those genre or general activities where it was meaningful, respondents were asked their reason for engaging in the particular reading activity, and where they were (at home, at work, at school, commuting, or somewhere else) at the time they did the reading.

Ultimately, results from the Reading Activities Survey will be available for a wide variety of respondent subgroups. At the present time, however, the only results available are for the total respondent population, and only these results will be reported in this paper. Perhaps a few demographic characteristics of this total population might be of interest. It will be recalled that the

interview opened with a few hopefully nonsensitive questions which would enable the interviewer to identify nonreaders. In response to these questions, 1.4% reported eye trouble more than glasses could take care of, and 3.9% reported they could not read most of the headlines in a regular everyday newspaper in English. These respondents were treated as nonreaders and skipped to special sets of interview questions.

93% of the respondents were born in the United States. English was the main language spoken in the childhood home of 87%, and of those who came from non-English speaking households, English is the predominant speaking and reading language now. Respondents are spread approximately evenly across the age range from 16 to 60 or older. 69% are married, 18% single, and 12% divorced, widowed, or separated. 52% are female, and 48% male. 30% are high school graduates, and 7% are college graduates. The most frequently reported occupational category is semi-skilled employee, accounting for 10% of all respondents.

Of the four genre covered specifically in the questionnaire, newspapers were read during the day preceding the interview by 73% of the respondents, followed by mail (53%), magazines (39%), and books (33%). Not surprisingly, the most popular section of the newspaper was the main news or first page, which was read by 91% of those who read newspapers at all. Next came local news with 75%, editorials and letters to the editor with 52%, women's or society pages with 50%, and sports, comics, and regular ads with 49% each. Of those who read the comics, a little more than half judged them to be of no importance. Interviewers also recorded reading activities in categories volunteered by respondents but not listed in the questionnaire. Of these, only "obituaries"

(mentioned by 10% of the newspaper readers) was sizeable.

The reading of mail was reported by 53% of the respondents. The two most frequent categories were bills or statements, read by 49% of the mail readers, and advertisements, read by 47%. Personal letters were a poor third at 33%. Bills and statements were generally considered of high importance, and advertisements not important.

39% of the respondents reported reading one or more magazines. The actual titles were recorded and later categorized. Of the magazine readers, 28% read magazines classified as general interest, 16% news and editorial, and 15% as womens and homemaking. Magazine reading took place predominantly in the home and was considered to be of moderate to high importance. As might be expected, readers of news and editorial magazines had a considerably higher average socioeconomic index than did readers of magazines in the other two categories mentioned.

It should be noted that each response category in the survey has an associated mean socioeconomic status index. Because of the relatively large number of cases in the sample, almost all differences between means are statistically significant, and therefore the determination of an <u>important</u> difference between socioeconomic means is to some extent arbitrary. In this paper, only differences of at least 1.5 points on the index scale will be mentioned.

33% of the respondents reported reading one or more books during the day preceding the interview. Although this was the lowest reported percentage among the four genre, it should be noted that the median reading times for

books were considerably greater than those for newspapers, magazines, or mail. As with magazines, respondents reported actual titles, and this information was later categorized. The two categories read by the greatest number of respondents were the "general" category and the Bible, each with 16% of those who reported book reading. The remaining responses were classified into a total of 31 categories, none of which contained a percentage approaching 16%. Perhaps contrary to expectation, respondents in general reported no difficulty in reading any of the book categories, including the classics, financial, mathematics, and philosophy. This might be interpreted to mean either that respondents are loath to report reading difficulty, or that people generally select only books they can read easily.

Of all the general activity categories probed by the interviewers, related reading activities were reported most frequently (by 70% of the respondents) for travelling and commuting, followed by recreation and use of free time with 54%. Reading was reported least frequently (by 4% of the respondents) for attendance at a theatre, game, or public event. Although there is a mass of information concerning reading behaviors in the various subcategories under each general activity, no particular pattern seems to emerge. Without claiming significance, here are a few facts which caught the eye:

> 15% of the population had read a menu during the previous day, which seems to indicate that more Americans eat out than I thought.
>
> In working around the house, the most frequently reported reading activities were words or sentences on the TV screen (20%) and the telephone book (15%).

At school, the most frequently reported reading activity was notices, signs, and bulletin boards - beating out forms, tests, schedules, library cards, dictionaries, notes, and written assignments.

49% of all travellers and commuters read billboards, and 44% read advertising in or on cars, buses, or trains.

61% of all shoppers read advertising displays, but half of these considered them not important. Although 25% of the shoppers read a checkbook or credit card, only 7% read a guarantee or warranty.

By far the most frequently mentioned recreational or free time reading activity is the reading of words and sentences on the TV screen, reported by 38% of the total population, or 70% of the TV watchers.

In summary, there were few surprises in the data for the total population. One reason for this may be that averaging results over all subgroups tends to obscure the more unusual and interesting patterns of particular subgroups. If this is true, subsequent subgroup analyses should reveal it. The socioeconomic index results were generally in accord with one's intuition. Readers had higher average indices than did nonreaders. Readers of materials generally believed to have more challenging or higher informational content had higher average socioeconomic indices than did readers of more sterile materials. And finally, perhaps the most consistent response pattern in the data was the overwhelming reporting of no reading difficulty for virtually all reading materials and behaviors surveyed. If this result is to be believed, it would appear that the nation may have a reading problem, but certainly not a readability problem.